

The Obligations We Owe: Reforming government in the shadow of COVID-19

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster The Rt Hon. Michael Gove MP delivered a speech hosted by the Commission for Smart Government and PUBLIC, on the launch of the [Declaration on Government Reform](#) and ahead of the Commission's final recommendations paper, to be launched in July 2021. [Originally posted on GOV.UK here.](#)

Delivered on 15 June 2021 (transcript of the speech, exactly as it was delivered)

Can I first of all thank my friend and colleague Nick Herbert for hosting today's speech. Nick has been a passionate campaigner for causes from the environment to the fight against HIV, and was a reforming minister who brought real moral clarity and intellectual rigour to the task of modernising the criminal justice system.

Now, his Commission for Smart Government, bringing together politicians, business leaders and former Government officials, is driving the intellectual effort required to reform how government works. By definition, the work of reforming government never ends, but there are times in our nation's life when the need for reform is greater and our plans must be more ambitious.

As I hope to explain, this is just such a time and the Commission for Smart Government's work could not be more relevant or necessary. The COVID-19 pandemic has been the biggest challenge governments across the globe have faced since the Second World War. Indeed, the response to the virus has had many of the qualities and features of a war-time mobilisation.

The scope of government action has had to expand to deal with the crisis and keep the population safe. Government has been compelled to hold large sections of the economy in a state of suspended animation and, of course, to borrow unprecedented sums. Technological innovation has accelerated as traditional constraints on scientific research have been set aside.

We've also seen greater co-operation between public and private sectors, and between scientists and business innovators. And we've also been fortunate that community spirit and public solidarity have been drawn on to weather the storm. Indeed we have also seen how both strengths and weaknesses in government have been made more vividly apparent than in normal times.

And there is another similarity too. After past conflicts and crises there has been a shared national determination to demonstrate that the sacrifices that so many endured were not in vain. That the suffering that so many faced should be an impetus to building a better future.

It's been a consistent feature of our national story that the weaknesses, fissures or fractures that have been laid bare or exacerbated by crises should be addressed with the same energy and single-mindedness required for a successful response to the crisis itself.

Over a hundred and fifty years ago, for example, we saw how crisis begets reform. The Crimean War was a remarkable catalyst for remarkable change. The amateurism, incompetence and complacency revealed by Britain's initial conduct in the war led to an irresistible movement for fundamental reform of the state. The rather prosaically titled Administrative Reform Association was set up at that time to press for smarter government and its campaign was championed by the Nick Herbert of it's time, Charles Dickens, who denounced the "obstinate rubbish" which stood in the way of greater meritocracy and proper accountability.

That clamour for change led to the implementation of the great Northcote-Trevelyan reforms which created a civil service where promotion was due to merit, careers were professionalised and the whole machinery of government was modernised. Gladstone, who as Chancellor of the Exchequer was midwife to these reforms, also introduced reforms into the Army, the system of national taxation, education and local government and these changes powered Britain's success in the second half of the nineteenth century.

And of course there was a similar impetus to domestic reform during and after the First World War. The aristocratic liberalism of the Asquith Government was superseded by a drive for greater national efficiency under Lloyd George and his coalition. The creation of the Cabinet Office under Maurice Hankey, its support for near-daily meetings of the War Cabinet and other innovations as well as innovations such as the Manpower Committee, brought greater rigour and focus to Whitehall.

The imperative to bring similar energy and direction to domestic policy – such that a population which had sacrificed so much should feel that a better world could be built – also drove other reforms.

H.A.L Fisher's Education Act extended universal schooling. Subsidies were given to local authorities to provide council housing. Unemployment insurance was extended to cover almost all workers. Agricultural workers were guaranteed a minimum wage. And the Ministry of Health was

established to give the State a critical role in improving public health. But of course the most powerful example of a conflict and crisis spurring dramatic domestic reform is the Second World War. Churchill's coalition and the Attlee Government which followed it generated sweeping change in how government worked and how the citizen was served.

A principal feature of the wartime coalition was restless innovation in the organisation of Government itself, a willingness to draft in outsiders to augment delivery and the marshalling of resources to meet specific cross-departmental challenges.

Look at Beaverbrook's role in aircraft production, Lord Woolton's work as Minister for Food and Minister for Reconstruction, and also the catalytic genius of the physicist Professor Lindemann - these are all examples of creativity and flexibility in administrative problem-solving that helped us win the War.

And even as the War was being fought, reforms were advanced at home. The Butler Education Act and the Beveridge Report were momentous - they extended universal education and providing the underpinning for a comprehensive welfare state.

The Attlee Government from 1945 to 1951 enacted even more sweeping domestic reform. It created the National Health Service, improved workers' rights and protections, massively extended social housing, as well as pensions and other benefits; it reformed agriculture, it invented National Parks and it established the Arts Council.

I would argue that four crucial lessons stand out from a review of these eras of reform in the wake of crisis.

The first is that crises, like power, reveal.

Whether they are military conflicts or natural disasters, wars or pandemics, the threats to life and order, economic growth and human flourishing. All of these compel governments and leaders to act imaginatively, mobilise effectively because they are being against a remorseless arithmetic of mortality and loss.

Crisis also reveal which arms of the state are effective; and which buckle under pressure.

An army unchanged in many ways since Wellington's day came to grief in the Crimea. The eirienic gentlemanliness of Asquith's approach to Cabinet government was inadequate to the challenge of the First World War. And

Churchill and Attlee had to jolt a government machine which was built for comfort rather than speed into a state fit for total war and mass mobilisation.

The second lesson is that crises spur innovation.

Faced with gathering threats and accumulating pressures, the normal rhythm of administration has to accelerate; ossified structures have to change, and the “obstinate rubbish” of which Dickens spoke has to be cleared away, to allow for better, more flexible and more adaptive methods of delivering for citizens.

From Northcote-Trevelyan and the creation of the Cabinet Office and War Cabinet, to the bespoke ministries of which I’ve spoken, cross-departmental task forces and the drafting-in of external expertise and talent, the nature of all of these crises made necessary change in the way Government works, compelling.

The third lesson is that the shared sacrifice a population endures during a crisis places an obligation on leaders to build back better. The populations’ view after such a sacrifice is there can be no going back to a status quo ante whose weaknesses have been more cruelly revealed by the suffering that so many have endured.

Extending educational opportunity, improving public health, providing citizens with better housing – all these and more have been the urgent demands of post-crisis renewal in the past.

And the fourth lesson is that the advance of science, technology and knowledge which crises spur also generates both new opportunities and higher expectations of what our societies can achieve in the future.

Whether it’s improved telegraphy and communications, new ways of organising emergency hospital care, greater mobility, better analysis of economic and other forces, enhanced scrutiny of data, unleashing nuclear energy or improving food production – previous crises and conflicts have driven scientific and technical innovations which has changed our world irreversibly.

As we emerge from the COVID crisis we can see that all these lessons from the past hold for us today.

In the COVID crisis, many arms and areas of government responded successfully, others did not.

The vaccination programme, the ventilator challenge, the rapid establishment of the Nightingale hospitals, the furlough programme, the delivery of an

extended Universal Credit programme, the identification of those who needed to be shielded and the delivery of direct support, the rapid escalation of testing and sequencing – and, above all, the commitment, courage and compassion of frontline public sector workers are all examples of the state and public servants responding effectively to the unprecedented set of challenges that has been the covid pandemic.

But there were also areas where real weaknesses in government were laid bare. The disease both exposed and exacerbated existing health inequalities. It revealed, once again, how confused lines of accountability and the wrong incentives impede effective delivery, especially when policies cross over from being the responsibility of an individual department to other parts of the public sector.

There were problems over PPE procurement, test availability, the clarity of data required for decision-making, the structure of Public Health England, the Cabinet Office's own co-ordinating functions, all these and a number of other areas all rose to the surface during the crisis.

These weaknesses, problems, failures have been recognised and are being addressed. But the deeper factors that impeded effective delivery must also be faced and reformed. The forthcoming Public Inquiry into COVID will help us do just that – but we must not wait until it concludes before improving what we already know has been deficient.

If the first lesson, that crises reveal, is clearly true of the COVID crisis, so is the second – that crises accelerate and drive change. Government had to become more open, more porous.

In order to make a success of the vaccination programme, outsiders like the newly-honoured Kate Bingham had to be enlisted, and Paul Deighton was similarly co-opted to overhaul PPE sourcing.

New, more agile, committee structures were established across government to bring together scientists, clinicians, civil servants, ministers and outside thinkers to address problems in real time rather than remitting everything for further consideration. Digital dashboards, visualising the latest data to inform ministerial decision-making, superseded the traditional lengthy submission-drafting process and the bureaucratic inertia that sometimes accompanies it.

The third lesson – that crises generate a public demand for the recognition of their sacrifices and a resolution to serve the country better – is also true of the pandemic. The inequalities in health provision, inadequacies in social care, and a growing backlog of deferred treatments create an imperative for reform

to improve public health, overhaul social care and modernise the diagnosis, treatment and care which the NHS provides for citizens.

Similarly, months of lost learning, which have hit the poorest hardest, require a renewed focus on education reform and the wider deployment of the interventions which we know drive higher attainment. And we also need actions to improve poor housing provision, extend economic opportunity and build on the spirit of community solidarity the crisis generated.

And the fourth lesson from past crises – that underline the importance of technological progress and spur scientific innovation – could also not be more resonant.

We have seen it in the speed with which vaccines have been developed, alongside advances in other medical treatments, including the deployment of therapeutics such as dexamethasone; and we have seen it in the pioneering use of large-scale genomic sequencing and also our greater knowledge of the impact of environmental degradation on public health. Technology has of course enabled remote working and the development of new data sharing and analytical tools; and it has allowed for the rapid re-purposing of manufacturing capacity for the pandemic response. These all point to new opportunities for rebuilding our society on better foundations.

It is precisely because the COVID crisis revealed weaknesses in our government and society, because it also showcased strengths, because it forced government to adapt and improve delivery, because the public demand we build back better and because we have knowledge now that we did not previously possess, that this Government is now determined to deepen and accelerate our programme for reform.

Almost a year ago, in a lecture at Ditchley to which Nick referred, I outlined the need for reform in how government works, which was already visibly urgent before the COVID crisis.

I argued that changes in our politics, driven by failures in preceding decades, made an overhaul of government necessary.

I maintained that government had to be closer to citizens, less tolerant of groupthink and more open to challenge – that we needed to modernise meritocracy. I also argued that the skills and knowledge needed by all of us in public service were changing, so we had to. I stressed the importance of using new data and digital tools to rethink government delivery. And I underlined the need for clearer accountability at every level.

I argued that Brexit created new opportunities and new demands. It was an unfrozen moment when we could reshape the State to serve citizens better, especially those who had felt overlooked and undervalued. And Brexit was also a process that removed an excuse for Ministerial inaction. Free of EU law and regulation, ministers had no hiding place. They were now more directly accountable to a rightly more demanding citizenry.

Since I made those arguments, it is clear to me that the COVID crisis has only intensified the need to go further. That is why this morning we published a Declaration on Government Reform, which sets out the need for change, the areas in which we will act and the specific initiatives we need to undertake to make reform real.

The Declaration broadly endorses the Ditchley analysis, and the actions we have in hand already to improve how government works – but it injects additional urgency into our programme.

We have, already, taken steps to bring government closer to citizens. Senior civil servants – the decision-makers who help determine government policy choices – have begun the process of relocating from London.

MHCLG is establishing a new headquarters in Wolverhampton, the Treasury will open a new economic campus in Darlington, the Home Office has announced a new centre of excellence in Stoke, and we in the Cabinet Office now have a second headquarters in Glasgow.

But we have much more to do – there are new institutions such as the National Cyber Force which can be located close to clusters of talent in Northern England and other departments will be moving as well.

This dispersal of decision-making must, of course, be accompanied by an enhancement of devolution. The example of metro mayors such as Ben Houchen and Andy Street shows how strong local leadership is vital to making all of government more responsive and addressing the inequalities which still hold us back.

Levelling up was the government's central mission before the COVID crisis hit. The Prime Minister's powerful vision of a country where opportunities are as universal as the talent and ambition of the British people, and where communities across these islands share in the UK's success, speaks to each of us.

But the experience of the last year only underlines how critical it is that we accelerate that ambition, that we now crack on and make up for time lost to

the pandemic – or as the Prime Minister would put it, we need to switch on the afterburners.

In the Ditchley Lecture I also outlined the need for improved training for everyone in government. And indeed a new Government Skills and Curriculum Unit has launched a programme that will drive up core skills, hone areas of specialist expertise, improve understanding of how to make the state more resilient and adaptive, and the unit will also harness new talent for the Civil Service from a wider range of backgrounds.

And another of the Ditchley actions – improving how Government uses data and provides digital services – has been taken forward. The creation of a new Central Digital and Data Office, led by gifted public servants in the shape of Tom Read and Joanna Davinson, and the external input of outside experts such as Doug Gurr and Paul Wilmott.

But while we have made progress in all these areas, today's Declaration affirms there is much, much more to do. And it also confirms that we can only make the progress we need at the pace we need if we work collaboratively.

Civil servants, politicians, everyone who works in public service is driven by the same imperative and motivated by the same ambition. What I've called the privilege of public service is the chance to make a difference, to improve the lives of our fellow citizens, to use the money and powers they entrust to us to extend their opportunities and support them through life's challenges.

On some occasions when we have been talking about the reform of Government, it has been regrettable that this has been seen as something that's been driven by politicians against the mulish opposition of bureaucrats.

And I also feel it's been a bit of a missed opportunity in the past when reform was felt as something done by ministers to civil servants, rather than with them. And I also feel it's been a real missed opportunity when we've been talking about open-ness and the deployment of outside talent and that's somehow been seen as a replacement for, or usurpation of, the vital role civil servants play. So it's time for a reset.

In more than ten years as a minister I have depended on talented, committed, public-spirited civil servants to deliver change and the Declaration published today is the fruit of discussion between ministers and officials; collaborative working, candid challenge between us and honesty about what needs to change.

Indeed, just as we share the same determination to improve outcomes for citizens, it was striking as ministers and civil servants worked together, how

many of the frustrations felt by officials were mirrored by ministers' experiences.

Whether it was the failure to reward risk-taking, the unmerited tolerance of poor performance, the soft bigotry of low expectations, the need for honest evaluation of the mistakes that we've made or the benefits that outside expertise can bring, there was an alignment in both analysis and support for radical solutions.

That is why when this morning, as Nick mentioned, Cabinet Ministers and Permanent Secretaries met together – for the very first time – to approve the Declaration there was a unity of resolve that we need to see these changes through.

The Declaration sets out a series of actions to which we can be held to account and we are collectively committed to driving them forward.

The first set of actions relates to how we improve the way that all of us perform and manage performance.

There is a new emphasis on serving every part of the UK more effectively. So we're going to accelerating the deployment of decision-makers closer to the communities they serve.

And we will ensure that public servants working in government and in the devolved governments of the UK – the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government, and the Northern Ireland Executive – can spend more time in each others' administrations. This should improve mutual understanding across the whole UK. It should help us to appreciate the different concerns and ways of working in different parts of the United Kingdom and it should also strengthen the bonds between public servants across the Union.

There is also an increased level of ambition about opening up public service to new talent.

That's not just about recruiting more talented people from under-represented groups – especially from working-class and non-metropolitan backgrounds – it's also about giving people from other professions and disciplines the chance to spend tours of duty in the Civil Service. And, critically, it's also about extending the range of routes for people with expertise, a different perspective and real creativity. Giving them the ability to challenge and to serve for a period in government.

The recent controversy about Lex Greensill's role in government and subsequent lobbying of ministers has led some to conclude that we should re-

erect barriers to outsiders coming in to serve and support ministers and public servants.

We'll wait for Nigel Boardman's review to look into the specifics of that case. But we must not allow the questions raised by that appointment to see a Berlin Wall rebuilt between the permanent Civil Service and others who can help us to enhance the performance of government.

In my time in government I have always been determined to bring in people who can counter groupthink, who can provide new perspectives and they have served in a number of roles – as non-executive directors of departments, policy advisers, policy fellows or in other positions.

Some of them, I confess, have had party political backgrounds. One was a Liberal Democrat donor, another a Liberal Democrat adviser and another went on to become a Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate. There's been people from other parties as well. I've worked with former Labour MPs, former Labour special advisers and former Labour party strategists. One has been a financial supporter of the Green Party, another the head of a charity which has been consistently critical of Conservative policy. Some have been individuals who have no party allegiance.

But one thing united all of them - they were all there to help government ministers and officials deliver the policy which the government was elected to enact and which the public demanded we deliver.

That's why I think efforts to restrict the openness of government are retrograde and blinkered. They misunderstand how government does, and should, operate.

While we should be wary of cronyism we must not run a closed shop. And acting impartially does not mean one should be ignorant of politics or the levers that change lives – indeed, an understanding of politics is central to making the right call, because the best decisions in government are made where political judgment, technical expertise and lived experience intersect.

Which is why our Declaration commits us to expand secondments, recruit more outsiders and considering how those with a commitment to serve can do so without unnecessary obstruction.

The example of Kate Bingham and Paul Deighton, the efforts of those from the military who drove the expansion of our testing programme – all are testament to the need to bring people into Whitehall and make it into an open marketplace of ideas.

The quid pro quo, of course, for increased porosity is clearer accountability. Which is why our Declaration commits us to stronger performance management, capability-based pay, enhanced scrutiny by non-executive directors of departmental delivery and also Permanent Secretaries being held to account against their departments' outcome delivery plans.

We all know that it's opacity in accountability, incoherence in reporting lines and a failure to be clear about what departments, ministers and permanent secretaries must deliver which has bedevilled effective government in the past.

Now, Permanent Secretaries will be liberated to deliver their essential responsibilities, and recognised, rewarded, for policy and delivery success. They will also be given the tools to 'manage out' poor performers and reward real achievement. The old rigidities of pay structures which incentivise churn, people moving on from job-to-job in pursuit of better rewards will go. The failure to consider past performance in post when considering promotion will end. The shuffling off of under-performing colleagues into new, and under-scrutinised, berths must no longer be tolerated.

And ministers too will accept greater responsibility and accountability. We will ensure we devote time and consideration to senior official appointments within our departments. Outcome Delivery Plans will be clear about what is demanded of us. We will commit to a training programme, so that we ourselves have a better understanding of project management and policy delivery.

And a new Evaluation Taskforce in the Cabinet Office will ruthlessly scrutinise the effectiveness of policies against the claims people like me make for them – it will be a counterweight to what I referred to in my Ditchley lecture as the sugar rush addiction we can develop to new policy announcements.

Policies which are failing to drive positive change in communities around the UK will be reformed, or terminated, no matter how invested any individual may have been in their creation.

Now all of our reforms will, of course, be subject to the same rigorous evaluation we demand of all others. Some initiatives will have to be altered and adjusted, others may prove counter-productive, and there will, undoubtedly, be the need still to press even further and even faster in some areas.

But I hope the direction of what I've talked about is clear – a government closer to the citizen, more open to challenge, more eager to learn, more

welcoming of outsiders, clearer in our accountability, more energetic in our management of both strong and poor performance, more transparent in what we seek to achieve, more honest about what works, more determined to adapt and evolve faster and more rigorously.

And of course, as well as improving the approach to those working in government, our reform programme also envisages a reshaping of the structure of government itself – reflecting the changes through which we are all living.

Public service delivery in the past has tended to segment the citizen's interaction with government into departmental silos or baronies. Whether it's with the Department for Transport and the DVLA for driving licences or the Department for Work and Pensions for Universal Credit, HMRC for tax returns or the Home Office for passports - the citizen has to navigate a disaggregated landscape of individual departmental baronies. And government departments themselves tend to sort individuals into groups of stakeholders, categories of recipients or clients, or clusters of need.

That is why we need to change. We need to build government around the individual – rather than brigading the individual into the sort of categories that suit government – that's got to be the way forward.

GOV.UK is a perfect example of what this means in practice. The citizen does not care which department has the information they want or runs the service they wish to use – so GOV.UK, the government's digital platform, doesn't either. And the wisdom of this approach is borne out by its popularity, which is now greater in terms of visits than the Guardian or Netflix.

Our plans for a single digital sign on will take this approach a step further, enabling everyone to secure rapid, responsive access to government services without boundaries impeding delivery. But we need to go further still. We need to rethink all of government so it responds effectively and rapidly, and in the same tailored fashion, as the digital platforms citizens have become used to.

Whether it's Amazon, Deliveroo or Uber, the thing about these platforms is that they understand their users, provide bespoke responses to individual needs, use accumulated data to refine delivery and also take account of the niche requirements of individuals. The principle of the “long tail” – the satisfaction of individual or small group needs – trump generalised delivery and that should be embedded into public service.

The need to look beyond the outdated model of individual departmental baronies was at the heart of the reforms introduced by my predecessor Francis Maude. Francis introduced a programme of change whereby those functions that were shared across individual government departments - HR, data security and so on, should be provided in a way that reduced inconsistencies, confusion and costs.

Francis's reforms meant that we saved money and we improved coherence overall. But there is still more to do to ensure we reduce duplication of effort, incoherence and waste. And of course we are conducting this work with the Treasury.

We are fortunate in the Chancellor, the Chief Secretary, and in Cat Little, their Director General for Public Spending, we have such committed allies. And they will join us in pushing the need for functional reform, particularly when it comes to ensuring that we have a more unified response than ever before to digital and data requirements for government.

That means really driving the principal that government should be one platform. A unified service for all citizens, which allows tailored responses to each citizen's needs – but it's also the case that we need to make sure that government as well as providing these services, also assembles and analyses the data we have to improve public service.

The COVID crisis exposed how inadequate data-sharing across government had been.

The Department of Health and Social Care, when ordering new PPE, was, initially, unable to discern what the PPE stocks in individual NHS Trusts might be. Information which should have been shared between the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, and HMRC on the need for government support was, at its best, imperfect. There are huge pools of information within each government department which, when we share them, can enable much more effective delivery of public services.

For example, when we think about levelling-up, we need to consider everything from educational opportunities and attainment to unemployment and welfare figures, transport links and digital connectivity to social capital and the rate of business formation. Only when we pool and cross-refer data from different departments and agencies can we really determine which interventions are best for specific geographical areas.

By sharing this information and analysing it appropriately, we can then discern the deeper patterns and policy relationships between all these factors.

Rather than aiming blind at the targets we need to hit, we can focus on the specific suite of reforms which can transform an area. Through the noise of all these numbers we can see the signal which points to lasting regeneration.

In an area like education, the more data we gather, pool and share with others, the better able we are to identify those factors which really do drive change – from Pupil Premium funding to universal infant free school meals; direct instruction in the classroom to a knowledge-rich curriculum.

We can also look at teacher turnover, wider employment opportunities, family poverty levels and other environmental factors which enable or hold back young people's opportunities as well as what is going on in schools.

Government data, effectively used, thus becomes a liberator of individuals. It enables us to arrive at conclusions drawn from evidence about what works to improve peoples' lives. It lets us compare interventions between areas. And it gives students and their families the ability to hold government to account.

Handling data requires government, of course, to protect privacy and safeguard individuals' rights. But data can be anonymised, ensuring that government departments observe the right protocols and are transparent in their working. And the prize of greater knowledge of what works, sharper accountability to the citizen and more control for communities is so enormously valuable that government cannot afford but to grasp it.

Working across these departmental boundaries must also extend not just to sharing data but also meeting specific policy challenges in new ways.

We must be ready to create new structures in government to deliver particular policies and projects where the accountability is vested in a single lead minister and one senior responsible official – but where the delivery team is drawn from different departments and agencies. Give that team a single budget allocated to the task and give them a fixed deadline for delivery.

I have been influenced in particular by my experience of the Brexit Operations Committee – or 'XO' in our internal parlance. Here, ministers, officials and delivery partners from organisations such as Highways England and the Kent Resilience Forum, met around the table almost daily with a clear, shared responsibility to prepare every arm of the state for the end of the Brexit transition period.

We also created new teams, such as the Border and Protocol Delivery Group, to bring together expertise from multiple departments including Transport, HMRC, and the Home Office, all under one leader to resolve a single over-arching policy challenge.

A similar approach has been taken through the COVID crisis with the creation of the COVID Operations Committee and the COVID-19 Taskforce, to co-ordinate the domestic policy response to the pandemic. Scientists, clinicians, data analysts, policy officials, ministers and outside experts have all worked together. And drawing talent from different areas of government has ensured the departmental perfect does not become the enemy of the public good.

Similar approaches can help overcome the disconnects in the criminal justice system, the development of the UK's space strategy, the more effective functioning of our Union and the levelling-up of our country.

Now, in outlining the scale and nature of the reforms in our declaration, I recognise there will be pushback, criticism and some cynicism.

Is our analysis correct, are our policies proportionate, are we lacking in ambition, do we miss what's truly important?

Well, in the spirit of honest evaluation, I hope tough questions are asked. Not just by the Commission for Smart Government but by politicians from all parties, Civil Service colleagues, other public servants and indeed citizens across the country. The plans we outline today are there to be tested, analysed and critiqued in order to inform them.

Because the most useful response to any government initiative is not "Yes, Minister" but "Why, Minister?". The duty we owe to our fellow citizens is to argue our point, deploy evidence, listen to challenge and try to convince by the quality of our case, or alter it. We need to show not just that we are acting, effectively and urgently, in citizens' interest – but also that we are working with them in a shared endeavour. Government not as aloof overlord, but accountable partner.

These are the obligations we owe to the public. We know that the vision and the actions that we signed up to this morning, and that I have talked about here, are just the beginning. They will help us to meet the demands of today and to build back better.

But we also know that in the future we will need to go further, and widen the dialogue on reform, in order to meet the looming challenges of tomorrow: speeding our progress towards net zero, forging a new place for our country on the world stage and making sure that the benefits of levelling up become an entrenched reality in every community in the country.

This is the mission that Simon Case, Alex Chisholm and I will be discussing tomorrow with thousands of colleagues at Civil Service Live. It is the task to which both the Cabinet and the Permanent Secretaries committed themselves

earlier today. And it is the right way to respond to the obligations we owe the country as we emerge from the shadow of COVID-19.

Now we must get on with the job.